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ABSTRACT

A program at General College, University of Minnesota, designed to strengthen the communication skills of nontraditional college students and to enable them to develop a command of English in all modes of communication is discussed in this paper. The program's underlying function is described as creating a bridge from a sheltered environment in which nontraditional students (primarily international and resident alien students and bilingual Chicano students) could both compete with and assist students like themselves in language skills, to a regular class environment in which these students could participate successfully. A description of the two-quarter integrated package of courses includes enrollment policies, program goals, course descriptions, and subsequent course modifications. First quarter course offerings are listed as vocabulary development, reading comprehension and study skills, oral communication, interpersonal communication, improving spelling and punctuation, and writing grammatical sentences and developing organized paragraphs. Second quarter courses listed are a writing lab for personal writing, oral communication/group discussion, and a content course in a science or social science. (AEA)

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COMMANDING ENGLISH

An Integrated Program of Communication Skills

Presented at the College English Association Conference

April 11, 1980

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"Why Johnny Can't Read" and "Why Johnny Can't Write" articles and analyses have been turning up throughout the media and education press for some time. We have heard the cry "Back to Basics," and many of us have attempted to heed it. In fact, the basics are not all that new to the faculty of the Arts, Communication and Philosophy Division of the General College, an open admissions college of general education at the University of Minnesota. Our courses in the basics--reading comprehension, study skills, vocabulary development, grammar and usage--go back nearly to the inception of the college; our Reading/Writing Skills Center, offering courses and tutoring in the basics, has been in existence since 1972, and the teaching methods, approach, and curriculum of our writing lab courses are recognized by the University of Minnesota as fulfilling the freshman composition requirement.

All of this, of course, might be expected; we have been educating non-traditional students for nearly fifty years, and we know that non-traditional students--whether they are non-traditional because of age, educational experience, ethnic or racial background, linguistic heritage, or socio-economic background--more often than not have poorly developed reading and writing skills. And so we have given them skills courses, piecemeal, in individual, sometimes isolated, units. And we have wondered why they have progressed less rapidly than we had anticipated. During Fall Quarter, 1978, for example, 48 percent of the 420 minority and disadvantaged students who attempted a full-time course load of at least 12 credits completed only six or fewer credits. Of those students, 119 did not complete any credits. Clearly, difficulty with reading and writing skill development is not the sole cause of losing these students, but neither are our skills courses enough of a factor to retain these high risk students. We need to handle the skills problems of our students more rapidly and more effectively,

if they are to reach their educational goals. Two groups of our students face greater frustration in developing their skills, both of them groups for which English is not the sole native tongue. For these students, international and resident alien students and bilingual Chicano students, development of their aural, oral, reading, and writing skills is crucial.

Put simply, non-traditional students--whether native English speakers or not--often require more than a few remedial courses and a writing course sandwiched into their other curriculum. We work with students who have professional goals--to become lawyers, business people, social workers, engineers, and physicians. Not only do they lack the necessary writing and reading skills for these fields, they lack the reading and writing skills necessary to survive in introductory coursework that might lead them to these fields. They need a way to develop the skills necessary for good performance in college coursework before they take introductory courses in areas they are interested in pursuing.

We have, we think, developed one approach to the needs of the non-traditional student that overcomes some of these problems. Throughout the academic year 1978-1979, a committee of interested faculty members met weekly to prepare a two-quarter integrated package of courses that would strengthen the nascent communication skills of non-traditional students, the purpose of the package to enable the student to develop a command of English in all modes of communication--hence its title--Commanding English. At the outset, we focused on the needs of the particularly high-risk population of non-native and bilingual English speakers. Working with these students in separate skill development courses had been only partially successful, because we were expecting them to see relationships that were obvious to us or to the more highly skilled students. As we analyzed the needs of these bilingual and

non-native English speakers, we realized that we had to integrate all communication skills--especially reading, writing, and speaking. While reading and writing are the most obviously weak skill areas, many of our students are just as handicapped by their oral skills--they do not know how to phrase questions, how to request assistance, how to deal with the University bureaucracy. They can speak but not always communicate. Furthermore, even for those students whose oral skills are more developed and versatile, the integrated approach makes sense. The correspondence between writing and speaking is not precise, but much can be learned about the area of written communication--whether one is giving or receiving the written language--by looking at what we do more readily and frequently in speech. We will go into examples in a moment; for now it is important only that we see greater success and less frustration among high-risk students when their skill needs are integrated into a coherent package.

In developing Commanding English as a pilot project, we necessarily limited class size to twenty-five students. In addition, we developed certain enrollment policies for the package. International students were required to report their Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency scores to the college, and only those students whose scores were above 65 were admitted to the program. Those who scored lower were referred to the Department of English as a Second Language (ESL uses a score of 80 to indicate proficiency in English). Resident alien students and Chicano students took the General College Admissions Comprehensive and were encouraged to enroll in the program if their scores on verbal and organizational skills were below the 50th percentile. Students, if they chose to register in the program, were committed to the sequence of courses the program faculty had planned for them, and to no others.

The first quarter curriculum is a full-time course load--especially

essential to the non-traditional student who may be dependent on financial aid for economic survival. The two required courses of the second quarter (along with the science or social science elective) also equal a full-time load. During the first quarter of the sequence, the courses which meet in a classroom setting are "Vocabulary Development," "Reading Comprehension and Study Skills," and "Oral Communication: Interpersonal Communication." Two other courses are also required in this quarter, "Improving Spelling and Punctuation" and "Writing Grammatical Sentences and Developing Organized Paragraphs"; both are offered as self-paced, tutorial, individual study courses through the Reading/Writing Skills Center and are scheduled at the students' convenience. In addition, the students meet with the faculty team of instructors in weekly informal discussion sessions.

During the second quarter, the students are offered two required classes in communication skills, an introductory freshman composition course--"Writing Lab: Personal Writing"--and "Oral Communication: Group Discussion," and a "content" course in a science or social science. To assist the students in making the transition to unsheltered courses--as their elective course is--they are encouraged to take an optional individual tutorial course in "Improving Study Skills and Reading Comprehension" from the Reading/Writing Skills Center. In this course, they learn the terminology, study methods, and note-taking and test-taking techiniques necessary in the discipline of their elective course. Our intention in developing Commanding English was to create a bridge from a sheltered environment--in which students could both compete with and assist students like themselves in developing language skills--to participating and succeeding in regular language classes.

We knew, of course, that we had to unify the work of the individual

courses, to reinforce the common goals of the courses, and to interrelate course materials, or the Commanding English program would simply fall apart into a series of discrete units--which was what students had previously been offered with only partial success. In Commanding English, the relationships between various communication skills are not assumed; they are emphasized.

To the courses themselves.

In each of the three first quarter classroom offerings--"Vocabulary," "Reading," and "Speech"--we had planned to provide content similar to the content of those courses designed for native English speakers, but we soon found ourselves modifying our expectations. Thirty-page weekly reading assignments in the speech class were reduced to ten. Instead of working with the shadowscope and the tachistoscope in the reading course, the shadowscope alone was used. A text on etymology in the vocabulary class was supplanted by a dictionary of American idioms. The consensus was not to overwhelm the students by giving them more material and reading than they could handle, but to emphasize their comprehension of what they did read, review, and work through. In the Reading/Writing Skills Center offerings, fewer adjustments were necessary, since the students were working at their own pace, but auxiliary materials were needed for particularly confusing lessons on sentence structure, and skill development rather than passing tests had to be emphasized as the goal of Reading/Writing Skills Center work.

We have learned to emphasize continual use of resources--those provided by the classes themselves, by the faculty, by the Skills Center tutors, by the graduate and undergraduate course assistants, and by the students themselves. Recognizing progress, however slowly it might come, is essential for our students. By using the shadowscope in the reading class, under

the instructor's supervision, the students can chart their progress, and see their reading rates improve. In the oral communication class, the students' presentations are often videotaped and played back to them, so their improvement in oral communication becomes tangible, visible to them and to us. The students practice the idioms of their vocabulary in context in class, and practice recognizing new words from a mastery of common roots and prefixes. In the Skills Center they write about their everyday occurrences, often using the vocabulary and idioms practiced in their other classes.

A crucial addition to the classes and to the individual work of the Skills Center is the informal weekly discussion with the faculty of the program, that is, the individual instructors and the program coordinator. The topics of the discussion are, for the most part, controlled by the students. One week, students asked about how to organize a paragraph, why the whole package of courses was required, and why English had so many silent letters. Another week, the discussion focused on the second quarter offerings, requirements of various colleges in the University, why some credits transfer to other colleges and others do not. One week we each met with our own advisees in the program (each student is assigned a Commanding English faculty member as an advisor) and another we invited a guest from the Counseling and Student Development division of the college. These sessions have been valuable to the faculty and students both. They are informal, so students ask whatever they wish; they see us as a team of instructors, all interested in the same goals--and they begin to see even more clearly the relationships between our courses.

We can already envision possibilities for the future. Of course, the program is not perfect; some changes have already been made, and more will come at the instigation of students and instructors alike. For

example, it took us nearly half of the first quarter to learn to make best use of the graduate assistants who were monitoring the Skills (capital) courses. They became invaluable in working with individual students, setting up special tutoring for special problems, and in providing helpful suggestions to the faculty. They matched stuients with tutors in the Skills Center and checked on their progress--all on a regular basis.

When the program was developed, we planned to require the second quarter course in "Reading and Study Skills." But as we worked with our students, we realized that they needed the responsibility to choose some of their own courses, and to learn to do this with guidance early in the program--so while they were encouraged to take "Reading and Study Skills," it was dropped as an absolute requirement.

Despite the improvement made by students in writing skills during the first quarter, many were not ready for a freshman composition class in the second quarter, so "Fundamentals of Usage and Style" (a pre-composition course) was substituted. Those ready for the composition class, "Writing Laboratory: Personal Writing," began there; those needing more work on fundamentals began there.

We have also learned that increased writing practice is needed in the individual study courses of the first quarter--with lesser emphasis on mastery testing. In the future, students in the individualized course will keep a journal of both free and assigned writing. While a text on sentence structure and paragraph development will be used, it will supplement the journal writing, not supersede it.

Finally, our students need to develop confidence in themselves as well as in their developing skills. To do this, we need to increase our support systems, particularly for the international and resident alien students--whose only contact with English may be at school or at work.

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Our Chicano students have already been involved with support/survival seminars and Chicano culture courses, but more and extended interaction with special counselors will need to be available to provide encouragement to minority and international students.

The rewards are already great. We can see that three major educational benefits to our students have begun to germinate: greater control of a second language, improved ability to handle course work at a major university, and a certain grace and ease in functioning in American society. The graduate and undergraduate tutors working with these students, and we faculty members who teach them directly, have already given up our preconceptions and sharpened our expertise in using our own powers of communication. Moreover, as our students pass through the program into their major fields at our university or at another, graduate, and return to their native cultures, they will help increase the international reputation of a university which will support its staff in giving its students the special help they need.

We have learned that we can indeed go back to basics, especially if those basics are part of a coherent program of language skill development. We have realized, in fact, that what we can offer bilingual and non-native English speakers through such a program we can also offer to native speakers whose language skills are poorly developed. The sheltered communication curriculum of Commanding English should enable them to succeed in developing their reading, writing, and oral skills, so that they can realistically be prepared to meet their educational goals.